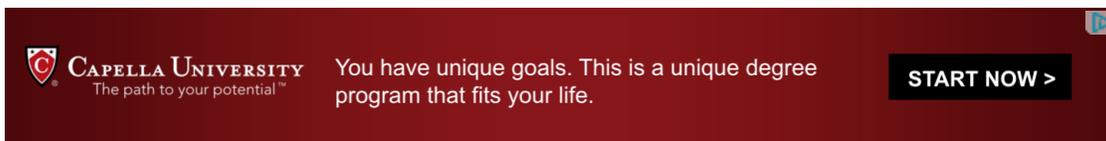


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## Four Activities for Building a Positive School Climate

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Schools are a slice of humanity: Everyone brings both their wonderful innate goodness and their challenging globby muck to the classroom. Creating a [safe and supportive school culture](#) is one of the most difficult tasks principals face as fearless school leaders. When they succeed, it helps everyone -- students, teachers, and themselves -- bring out the goodness and reduce the muck.

Given the extraordinary complexity of this task, wouldn't it be great to hand principals a "silver bullet" for building a learning environment in which everyone thrives?

But alas, no silver bullet exists.

For principals who aren't sure where to start, the Greater Good Science Center's new website, [Greater Good in Action](#), offers many research-based practices that can easily be adapted for use in staff meetings and professional development workshops, and for developing principals' own social and emotional capacities as they work with students and staff.

Here are a few examples.

### If you want to help everyone slow down, you might try:

**Mindful Breathing.** A study in the UK found that [supportive principals](#) contributed to teachers' ability to regulate their emotions, which led to greater job satisfaction and sense of personal accomplishment. Thus, principals who start their staff meetings with a moment to breathe in and breathe out are communicating to teachers that their well-being is important.

Many studies show that a few mindfully taken deep breaths can also help everyone let go of the anxiety, stress, and negative emotions that are so often pervasive in our schools. Slowing down to breathe gives everyone permission to stop and connect with that part of themselves that makes them human -- a good reminder given that schools are in the business of developing human beings!

For a fun and light way to introduce this practice, try playing Holly Near's "[Uh Huh](#)" (many thanks to [Pamela Seigle](#) from [Open Circle](#) and [Leading Together](#) for introducing me to this song).

### If you want to build trust and collegial support, you might try:

**Active Listening.** Scientists have found that [strong relationships](#) are key to a healthy school environment -- and it's not just the teachers who need to feel supported. For example, one study found that the principals who had the [highest levels of interaction](#) with their teachers experienced greater job satisfaction and commitment than those school leaders who had limited interaction.

To me, feeling fully seen and heard by another person is one of the most powerful ways to build strong relationships. But to do that, we need to practice listening to each other. Creating the time and space to actively listen to a colleague can build empathy and a sense of connection -- and it can help fill a teacher's emotional tank, which so often gets depleted from the emotional demands of teaching.

For a school staff that might squirm at the idea of baring their souls to each other through active listening, choosing a benign prompt such as "Describe your perfect day" or "Tell me about the best thing that happened to you this week" might help ease everyone into the process.

### If you want to help teachers -- and yourself -- stave off burnout, you might try:

**Feeling Supported.** Researchers, thankfully, are beginning to pay attention to the emotional demands of teaching, and the resultant burnout. And, also thankfully, several programs now exist for helping teachers deal with these demands in a healthy way.

Principals, too, are not immune to burnout. Indeed, one study in Australia found that principals who were constantly modeling care through their words and actions were experiencing both physical and emotional fatigue.

Paradoxically, a possible solution to feeling overwhelmed by our relationships can actually be found... in our relationships. Researchers have discovered that when we feel safe and secure in our significant relationships, we are more likely to help others, like our students and colleagues.

Starting the year with a list of up to six people we can turn to for support will help remind teachers and principals that they're not alone in what can be a very isolating profession. Hopefully there's at least one colleague on everyone's list, but if not, that's okay, too -- sometimes it's helpful to get a reality-check from someone who has nothing to do with the "crazy-making" antics of students (or colleagues).

**As an alternative to punitive teacher evaluation processes, you might try:**

**Best Possible Self.** Motivating students to engage in their learning is a critical part of teaching. But researchers have also found that the motivation of teachers is just as important -- and setting personal goals, particularly relational ones, rather than punitive evaluation processes is a much more effective method.

To illustrate, one study found that the students in classrooms with teachers whose main goal was to create warm and caring relationships with them reported that their teachers were more socially and emotionally supportive and used better teaching practices, such as viewing mistakes as opportunities to learn.

Introducing the Best Possible Self practice to teachers at the beginning of the year -- and allowing them to focus on things other than increasing test scores -- is a wonderful way to communicate to teachers that who they are matters. While you may want to adapt the exercise to focus on Best Possible Self as a Teacher, the alignment of personal and professional goals is a powerful method for increasing teachers' job commitment.

While building a positive school culture may seem like an onerous process at first, it really doesn't have to be. Using practices such as these and others that can be found on the Greater Good in Action website encourage people to connect with one another and to see each other's inherent value -- a win-win for students and adults alike.

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